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**ASSESSING THE NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER'S EFFECTIVENESS  
IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Following the September, 2001 attacks on America, the U.S. government embarked upon an investigatory phase to determine how and why the attacks occurred, and to determine what changes needed to be made to prevent their reoccurrence. Resulting conclusions led to an understanding of a new world environment and U.S. threat, and necessary changes in the federal government's policies, procedures, and organization required for effectiveness in the new environment. As the government transformed to meet the Global War on Terror's requirements, one of the most significant changes was the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center, created to perform a dual intelligence and planning coordinating function across the interagency. This research project examines the National Counterterrorism Center's effectiveness in the Global War on Terror in meeting U.S. strategic requirements, through the prism of its statutory role and current practices, existing U.S. strategy, and the Global War on Terror contemporary operating environment. The project reveals both significant achievements and challenges for the Center, and provides recommendations for future improvements to ensure its effectiveness in meeting U.S. strategy.



## ASSESSING THE NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER'S EFFECTIVENESS IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

History will ultimately judge the global significance, ramifications, and lasting impacts of the terrorist attacks on America in September, 2001. Nonetheless, the U.S. government's failure to anticipate and prevent these attacks did serve to initiate substantial changes in the organization and operations of many federal agencies to meet the demands of the conflict termed the Global War on Terror (GWOT). At the time of the attacks, U.S. national security structure and methodologies were largely those that had been designed to fulfill Cold War objectives.<sup>1</sup> After numerous investigations into the disastrous attacks of 9-11, the U.S. government began instituting transformational initiatives in order to bridge the gap between the Cold War legacy structure of the national security apparatus and the modern demands of fighting terrorism.

The most far-reaching of the initial executive branch changes was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), given the principal mission of preventing terrorist attacks within the United States and reducing the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism.<sup>2</sup> The Department's broader charter was coordinating governmental anti-terrorism efforts within the borders of the United States. A less publicized, but equally far-reaching, reform was the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). The NCTC, a subordinate component of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), was established by Executive Order 13354 in August 2004,<sup>3</sup> and subsequently promulgated into law by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004.<sup>4</sup> The NCTC serves as the single U.S. agency charged with planning the nation's counterterrorism activities and integrating all instruments of national power (military, diplomatic, economic, financial, intelligence, information, and law enforcement) in the war on terrorism. In contrast to the DHS, the NCTC's focus is largely "beyond the shores" of the United States. Collectively, the establishment of the DHS and NCTC represents a monumental shift in America's approach to dealing with the security threat posed by terrorism, both within and outside of America's borders. Each of the newly created organizations now have a planning, coordinating, and synchronizing function that spans across departmental and agency boundaries.

More than two years since its inception, however, the NCTC has arguably achieved neither an acceptable level of effectiveness nor efficiency in performing its intended role. Despite Presidential and Congressional intentions, the NCTC does not have the requisite resources or the required authorities to achieve its full potential. Granted, large scale, measurable results with respect to reducing the terrorist threat and improving interagency

coordination are difficult to obtain in a two year span. Yet, two years of functional operation have generated questions and skepticism concerning the NCTC's near term utility and long term viability in the GWOT.

This paper assesses the NCTC's effectiveness in the GWOT in meeting U.S. strategic GWOT requirements through an examination of the GWOT threat, the NCTC's statutory role, and current practices. It considers three basic questions within the domain of the NCTC's global and domestic contemporary operating environment: What was the NCTC charged to do and is it doing so? How well is the NCTC executing what it was charged to do? And, how effective is the NCTC within the GWOT domain in meeting U.S. strategic GWOT requirements?

Regardless of this paper's finding and the pontifications of untold others, one conclusion resonates clearly for the NCTC. Its relevance and success will depend upon greater commitment from across the government to its lead role in the fight against terrorism, and will require additional resources and authorities in carrying out its mission. Specifically, the NCTC can achieve the effectiveness needed for U.S. strategic success with improved execution of those missions assigned to it by law, with the addition of selected increased authorities and clarification of those authorities already assigned to it, with greater commitment and cooperation from across the interagency, and with a more clearly delineated decision making process.

The foundation for assessing NCTC's effectiveness lies in an understanding of the GWOT global operating environment, in which the NCTC and the elements of national power must function.

#### The Contemporary Operating Environment: The GWOT

Aptly stated by one author, "... to make the decisions and allocate the resources needed to ensure U.S. security, Americans must understand the world as it is – not as we want – or worse yet, hope – it will be."<sup>5</sup> Understanding the contemporary world is no easy task. Five years of U.S. GWOT operations and analysis reflect an image of a complex and dynamic global operating environment and threat. Terrorists are constantly adapting their tactics and strategies to thwart the counterterrorism policies and programs instituted by the U.S. government and allies. In addition, U.S. leaders must be constantly reacting to constantly evolving political and economic influences (both global and domestic) within the context of a ubiquitous information domain. Within this swirling environment, the NCTC must be capable of understanding the relevant dynamic factors influencing the nation's goals, determining effective governmental ways and means to achieve those goals, and effectively coordinating the elements of national power to execute the nation's strategy.

Named in the emotional aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, the GWOT is an inherently difficult term and conflict to define and comprehensively understand. In name, the GWOT implies that our nation is at war with a specific tactic – terrorism. In fact, every American President since Jimmy Carter has struggled against terrorism.<sup>6</sup> However, terrorism prior to 2001 was viewed and treated principally as a law enforcement problem.<sup>7</sup> Many of the 9-11 Commission's findings and recommendations are aimed at establishing a new framework for addressing this key security challenge.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the DHS and NCTC creation mandates were largely intended as a correction to a myopic legal approach to terrorism.

Some have likened the GWOT to the Cold War,<sup>9</sup> but that narrow linkage belittles the vastly more complex and dynamic factors involved in the GWOT, including the impacts of non-state actors, religion, and socio-economic culture. Analysts and policymakers have struggled to develop an overarching framework for a counterterrorism strategy. Some have argued that we are in fact engaged in a global counterinsurgency, participating in what has come to be known as Fourth Generation Warfare.<sup>10</sup> Others have taken a somewhat longer view postulating that the U.S. is now in phase three of the GWOT. This view argues that the 9-11 attacks and the immediate U.S. responses encompassed phase II, and phase one began in the early 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Despite these efforts to simplify and categorize the terrorist threat, the complex reality facing the NCTC is that the U.S. is neither fighting a singular tactic, nor a lone rogue nation-state, nor one specific organization or even individual. This absence of a unified threat means that the war in the GWOT is like no other endeavor in which the U.S. has undertaken.

As described by the 9-11 Commission<sup>12</sup> but not necessarily widely appreciated, the enemy the U.S. confronts is not some “generic evil” of terrorism, but the intentions and ideological goals of “Islamist terrorism.”<sup>13</sup> More bluntly, a 9-11 Commission member claimed that, “We are not at war against terror any more than World War II was a war against kamikazes.”<sup>14</sup> Many respected experts within and outside of the government accurately describe the real war for the U.S. as a struggle with a worldwide religious revivalist movement, inspired and founded on Islamic extreme Salafist ideologies, with the goal of reestablishing a Muslim caliphate stretching from Morocco to the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. and the West are the “far enemies” of this movement.<sup>16</sup> The NCTC's challenges are greatly magnified by this evolving threat, which is indeed more than a war on “terror” in and of itself.

The 9-11 attacks awakened the U.S. and thrust the fledgling NCTC into a modern international system consisting of traditional and non-traditional actors – nations, nation states, and a litany of non-state actors.<sup>17</sup> Those non-state actors, terrorists included, have become transnational and information technology has greatly enhanced their ability to coordinate actions

while maintaining a global grass roots appeal..<sup>18</sup> The 2002 National Security Strategy described this new security environment prior to the NCTC's creation. In his introductory declaration to the 2002 strategy, President Bush wrote that "Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America...Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank."<sup>19</sup> He added, "To defeat this threat we must make use of every tool in our arsenal — military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing."<sup>20</sup> Without implicitly saying so, the President outlined the rationale for the NCTC's creation. The NCTC was designed to take on the challenge of making effective use of this arsenal of tools in executing the President's strategy.

Post-NCTC creation, the 2006 National Security Strategy began with the simple but powerful statement, "America is at war."<sup>21</sup> Highlighting changes in the conduct of war, a major portion of the strategy addressed the transformation of government functions and processes in order to meet the security threat posed by the GWOT.<sup>22</sup> Within this construct, the global Salafist social movement in general, with Al Qaeda in the forefront, comprises the current principal U.S. threat in the GWOT.<sup>23</sup> In and of themselves, though, a global social movement, a terrorist organization, and their affiliates do not encompass the only GWOT threats to the U.S. Further complicating the NCTC's threat array, one author states that "our prime enemies are the terror masters – the rulers of the countries that sponsor terrorism, and the leaders and soldiers of the terrorist organizations themselves."<sup>24</sup>

A recent study group categorized the threat as "not terrorism, or even all terrorist organizations, but rather the jihadist terrorists who seek to hijack Islam and use violence to replace existing governments with nondemocratic theocracies."<sup>25</sup> It added that the GWOT "is actually a struggle by governments around the world to deal with a revived radical and violent minority Islamist movement that has taken on greater international dimensions in the twenty-first century than it has previously in history."<sup>26</sup> Further complicating the threat is the hydra-like nature of modern-day terrorist organizations. Author Marc Sageman, in *Understanding Terror Networks*, classified the Salafist movement as:

. . . a set of more or less formal organizations, linked in patterns of interaction ranging from the fairly centralized to the more decentralized and with various degrees of cooperation, resulting in more or less connected terrorist operations. Participants in the global jihad are not atomized individuals but actors linked to each other through complex webs of direct or mediated exchanges.<sup>27</sup>

The NCTC describes the counterterrorism threat as having three distinct elements, each with differing characteristics and capabilities, and each requiring different methods for its defeat.



The first element is Al Qaeda and its core senior leadership, noted as the preeminent threat of concern. The second is generally defined as other Sunni groups around the globe inspired by Al Qaeda and subscribing to its violent extremist worldview. The third element consists of small variants of traditional terrorist cells or groups that operate independently and are inspired by Al Qaeda, but do not fall under the command and control of the Al Qaeda senior leadership.<sup>28</sup>

It would be difficult to conceive of a more difficult operating environment and a more complicated and dynamic threat array facing the U.S. Given this environment, America's ends in the GWOT must be accomplished in various ways by the means – the elements of national power – to meet the war's conduct and nature. The government must ensure that these ways and means are employed appropriately, and in the right place, at the right time, to ensure success. The NCTC's purpose and utility derive from this strategic imperative.

To achieve success in its counterterrorism programs, the U.S. must be as adaptive or more adaptive than the enemy, be capable of implementing ways and means that transcend interagency boundaries, be capable of determining implementation successes and failures, and be capable of employing all elements of national power in a synchronized manner. Coordination, synchronization, and unity of effort are required. Underlying each of these challenges is the need for mechanisms to breach the inevitable bureaucratic blockades that are bound to be established.<sup>29</sup> This is a monumental undertaking for the U.S. government. The 9-11 Commission summarized the problem plainly: "It is hard to 'break down stovepipes' when there are so many stoves that are legally and politically entitled to have cast-iron pipes of their own."<sup>30</sup>

Defeating the nation's GWOT threat abroad requires an agile, adaptive planning and execution system that is at least equal to, and preferably exceeds, those of the enemy. The benchline requirement calls for a governmental agency to achieve unity of effort spanning the interagency, empowered to plan and implement strategies in a synchronized manner, regardless of functional or geographic divisions of work. This was the fundamental purpose for the NCTC's establishment.

#### The NCTC Creation, Role, and Current Practices

The NCTC's addition to the executive branch was largely, the result of the 9-11 Commission's findings during the investigations after the 9-11 attacks. The void it was designed to fill was a contentious one as its responsibilities would cross well-established bureaucratic boundaries and established authorities. The Commission found that "... because coping with terrorism was not (and is not) the sole province of any component of the U.S. government,

some coordinating mechanism is necessary.”<sup>31</sup> That a “coordinating mechanism” was necessary was evident. What was not clear was whether the U.S. needed a bureaucratic addition to perform that function, or merely needed to adjust existing organizations and processes to more effectively perform that role. The DHS was established prior to the NCTC and had begun performing the counterterrorism role within the boundaries of the U.S. Still lacking was a similar approach to solve the problem of coordinating the massive American effort overseas and effectively linking domestic and overseas operations, optimally with little or no seams.

Prior to the 2001 attacks, normally the executive office of the President – either Presidential assistants or the National Security Council – performed the “coordinating mechanism” role pertaining to America’s counterterrorism activities. The National Security Act of 1947, in fact, explicitly placed this advisory function, but not an operational coordination function, within the NSC.<sup>32</sup> The 9-11 attacks revealed the inadequacies of this approach. Years of strategic guidance, direction, and general oversight failed to galvanize the governmental resources required to sufficiently address the growing threats beyond America’s borders and determine appropriate means to counter them. Given the choice of growing the National Security Council’s capacity or creating another body to perform the role, both the President and the 9-11 Commission leaned heavily toward the latter.

Additionally, given the GWOT contemporary operating environment, the 9-11 commission’s request for a “coordinating mechanism” is arguably an insufficient step to address the global threat of terrorism. Effectively confronting the terrorist threat to our national security requires not mere ‘coordination’, but the ‘synchronization’ of all the elements of national power to achieve strategic aims in the war. Optimally and fundamentally, the NCTC was conceived and needed to perform a function that met the government’s new strategic needs.

Internal governmental transformation highlighted the NCTC’s developing mandates. The 9-11 Commission identified the lack of unity of effort in anti-terrorism efforts as one of the major governmental failings leading up to the September, 2001 attacks. Although appearing to be a modern, singular failing, throughout America’s history there has been tension, friction, divergent lines of effort, and competing priorities within the government, even during war. World War II, for example, proved to be a challenging time for interagency coordination, principally between the Departments of State and War.<sup>33</sup> Interagency interaction and coordination to achieve overall governmental effectiveness in carrying out policy remains a challenge today. The 9-11 Commission’s five recommendations to solve this problem included unifying domestic and foreign strategic intelligence and operational planning against Islamist terrorists through a

National Counterterrorism Center; unifying the intelligence community by appointing a new National Intelligence Director; and, merging government participants in the counterterrorism effort and their knowledge in a single network-based information-sharing system.<sup>34</sup> Executive Order 13354 and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004 heeded the spirit of those recommendations.

While Congress deliberated and the 9-11 Commission continued its investigation, the President authorized the establishment of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center in May of 2003, which would later form the initial nucleus of the NCTC's structure. This center was advertised as the nation's first permanent "joint" terrorism center, employing representatives detailed from across the government. The purpose of the center was to begin the arduous task of integrating GWOT intelligence data, and provide relevant and timely data to the President and other agencies. Overall, the center was intended to "harmonize the efforts of various agencies."<sup>35</sup>

The President issued Executive Order 13354 in August, 2004 in order to "protect the security of the United States through strengthened intelligence analysis and strategic planning and intelligence support to operations to counter transnational threats against the territory, people, and interests of the United States of America . . ."<sup>36</sup> The order established the NCTC, and mandated that its director be appointed by the Director of Central Intelligence. As directed by the President, the NCTC's major functions were to serve as the primary organization in the U.S. Government for analyzing and integrating all intelligence pertaining to terrorism and counterterrorism; conduct strategic operational planning for counterterrorism activities, to include the integration of the instruments of national power; and, assign operational responsibilities to lead governmental agencies for counterterrorism activities as applicable with law.<sup>37</sup> The order also directed other agencies to cooperate with the NCTC, and did not specifically constrain its operational authorities. From an executive branch perspective, then, the NCTC's functions were aligned with counterterrorism intelligence integration, strategic planning, and the delineation of governmental responsibilities in strategy execution.

From the legislative branch, The Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004 of December, 2004, Public Law 108-458, created the Director of National Intelligence and the NCTC as one of its subordinate organizations. Substantially mirroring the text contained in Executive Order 13354, yet containing some notable discrepancies, the legislation stated that the NCTC was not authorized to direct any particular agency to execute any portions of its strategic planning efforts. It could plan for the government, but not order implementation. Significantly, however, it added specific responsibilities to one of the NCTC Director's principal

deputies, the Director of Strategic Operational Planning, including prescribing plan content, and a requirement to monitor the execution of governmental counterterrorism efforts.<sup>38</sup> Combined then, Executive Order 13354 and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act, framed the NCTC as the singular governmental agency for planning, integrating, directing responsibility for, and monitoring the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the GWOT. Ironically, this contradicted the 9-11 commission's admonition that it would be unwise to concentrate too much planning and management authority in the GWOT in one organization.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the NCTC's effectiveness remained dependent upon willing interagency compliance and cooperation, or in their absence, increased Presidential oversight and direction. To date, neither has fully occurred.

Since its creation, the NCTC is understandably still learning, maturing, and growing. However, its published procedures demonstrate a seeming unwillingness to take a bold implementation approach and a preference to avoid bureaucratic conflict. The NCTC's articulated vision is to "become the nation's center of excellence for terrorism and counterterrorism issues, orchestrating and shaping the national and international effort to eliminate the terrorist threat to U.S. interests at home and abroad."<sup>40</sup> Standard governmental verbosity aside, this vision statement inauspiciously paints a picture of a non-confrontational think tank that identifies issues, and attempts to merely influence the greater governmental efforts against counterterrorism. Proclaiming a future capability of becoming an undefined "center of excellence," and mastering "counterterrorism issues" do not confidently portray an organization responsible for planning and executing the nation's counterterrorism strategy. Further, "orchestrating and shaping" conveys a hands-off approach pertaining to the national effort, while the inclusion of the "international effort" warns of a potentially distracted focus.

The NCTC's self-stated mission is equally lacking:

Using all elements of national power, develop the strategic plans and conduct the analysis needed to identify terrorists and their supporters that threaten our national interests; detect their plans, intentions and means of support; and provide assistance to the operational elements of the U.S. Government who have responsibility for the defeat, destruction, arrest, or disruption of these groups or individuals to prevent further attacks.<sup>41</sup>

Echoing its vision statement, the NCTC's mission charts an inadequate understanding of its mission and foretells a doomed approach to its role that fails to meet the intent of the legislation contained in the Intelligence Reform Act of 2004. Furthermore, it does not capture the literal roles and mission assigned to it by Congress, to plan, integrate, delineate responsibility, and monitor. As stated, it rightfully includes all elements of national power, yet lists as its principal

tasks: develop strategic plans; conduct analysis; detect terrorist plans; and, provide assistance to operational elements of the government. These tasks fail to sufficiently articulate the intent and literal directives assigned to it by law.

The NCTC's organizational structure continues to evolve. The Director is appointed by the President and must be confirmed by Congress. The Director has a dual reporting chain, reporting to the DNI for budgetary and intelligence matters, and reporting directly to the President for the "planning and progress of joint counterterrorism operations."<sup>42</sup> This authority to report directly to the President provides a great deal of potential interagency authority and power for the director. However, his position in a subordinate role to the DNI places potential, if not actual, constraints to the exercise of this authority. Ideally, the NCTC director should not be placed in a position of potential disloyalty or insubordination with his immediate superior in order to exercise his authority with the President.

Under the NCTC Director are five principal sub-organizations, consisting of the directorate of intelligence, the information sharing and knowledge development department, the plans and administration department, the current support and requirements department, and the directorate of strategic operational planning.<sup>43</sup> The intelligence directorate performs intelligence fusion and integration functions, while the strategic operational planning directorate fulfills strategic planning, governmental role delineation, and monitoring functions. These directorates and other portions of the staff are filled with ad hoc representation from across the interagency, most of whom are detailed on a non-permanent basis, and still ultimately responsible to their parent entities. The greater governmental intelligence community provides most of the manpower in the intelligence and information directorates, while the DNI and the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, and State provide the majority of manning for the others. In late 2006, DOD alone had more than fifteen senior officers detailed in the intelligence and strategic operational planning directorates.<sup>44</sup>

The NCTC is planning to adjust and standardize the manning process, to develop an organization that retains interagency expertise through a small permanent cadre (for continuity) augmented by rotational detailees from across the interagency. Further highlighting the apparent ingrained "hands off" approach to personnel management, the NCTC states that this process will "attract qualified officers while protecting the equities of our mission partners."<sup>45</sup> If not corrected, the existing practice sustains an environment that fosters continued loyalty of NCTC employees to their parent agencies rather than the NCTC itself.

The strategic operational planning directorate is the engine for the NCTC's planning function, and "fills the gap between policy, strategy development, and the execution of

counterterrorism operations.”<sup>46</sup> The NCTC’s planning methodology is centered on a rudimentary planning model. In their view, policy flows downward from either the DNI or from the President through the National Security Council and provides the structure and the directives for strategy development. The developed strategy, consisting of goals, objectives, and tasks, additionally seeks to coordinate interagency operational plans, assigns lead agency responsibilities, reviews resource allocations, and provides a framework for monitoring and assessment. The resultant strategy, coordinated and staffed through the Counterterrorism Security Group (a policy coordination committee) of the National Security Council, is then conveyed to the implementing departments and agencies.<sup>47</sup> It is a sound, simple, and effective planning model, closely resembling those found within DOD. The obvious and critical difference is that when delivered to the interagency, the NCTC’s plans have no directive authority for implementation.<sup>48</sup>

Since the NCTC’s inception in 2004, America’s strategy in the GWOT has evolved. The question remains whether the 2004 directive and law establishing the NCTC and its roles, combined with the NCTC’s existing methods, are appropriate to the new security and threat operating environments, and effective in developing and executing current U.S. strategy in the GWOT.

During the period of NCTC’s intellectual development, the 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism classified the enemy as “terrorism.”<sup>49</sup> The overarching national intent of this strategy was to “stop terrorist attacks against the United States, its citizens, its interests, and our friends and allies around the world . . .”<sup>50</sup> The goals selected to achieve these ends, encompassing the strategy in existence at the time of the NCTC’s emergence, were to defeat terrorists and their organizations, deny sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists, diminish the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit, and defend U.S. citizens and interests at home and abroad.<sup>51</sup>

According to the 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the U.S. is at war with a “transnational terrorist movement fueled by a radical ideology of hatred, oppression, and murder.”<sup>52</sup> This is an exponential intellectual and practical leap from threat as defined in 2004 when the NCTC was initially established. The strategy’s main components in this new security document are to advance effective democracies as the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism; prevent attacks by terrorist networks; deny weapons of mass destruction to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them; deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states; deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror; and, lay the foundations and build the institutions and structures we need to carry the

fight forward against terror and help ensure our ultimate success.<sup>53</sup> For the NCTC, this strategy signifies that its planning, integration, and monitoring functions for U.S. GWOT counterterrorism activities have been greatly complicated and expanded, however, without a parallel increase in directive or execution authority.

According to the Bush administration, the NCTC is already doing its job well. Unfortunately, there is much evidence to suggest that this may not be the case. In a September, 2006 report, entitled “9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges,” the administration inadequately assesses the NCTC’s strengths and failings. The report mentions the NCTC’s creation as an accomplishment, yet does not specifically mention the challenges facing the government’s single entity for coordinating and integrating the GWOT effort.<sup>54</sup> This is not an accurate portrayal of the NCTC’s current state of development. The NCTC continues to confront numerous significant bureaucratic and legal obstacles and challenges in fulfilling its statutory missions. However, despite some misguided doubts that the military leadership of the NCTC “seems ill-suited to nurture the strategic intelligence needed for a long-term campaign against terrorism,”<sup>55</sup> it can effectively perform its legislated role, if changes are made.

The NCTC can achieve the effectiveness needed for U.S. strategic success with a refined execution of those missions assigned to it by law, with the addition of selected increased authorities and clarity of those authorities already assigned, with greater commitment and cooperation from across the interagency, and with a more clearly delineated decision making process.

As a starting point, the NCTC must refine and improve internally as a first priority. It should maintain the transformational momentum it gained with its creation and improve the effectiveness of its internal procedures, particularly in its senior leadership positions. In order to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and develop the agility required by the operational environment, the center’s senior leaders must smartly assert greater authority within the interagency while setting conditions for future, improved cooperation. The principal deputies must serve as agents of institutional change and more quickly work to achieve true intelligence integration and focused, interagency inclusive strategic operational planning. The fact that the NCTC – two years after its creation – is in the early stages of developing procedures for the operational integration of interagency actions speaks to the lethargic culture that must be eliminated within its own office space. That is one of its core competencies and it must be gotten right.

Concurrent with internal change, the NCTC director, Vice Admiral (Retired) Scott Redd, must devote his energies externally toward gaining the resources required for his organization

to succeed: qualified people from across the interagency, increased funding, and greater interagency authority through legislation. Despite the NCTC's progress, it still does not yet have sufficient resources or personnel to fulfill its intelligence and planning role.<sup>56</sup> He must improve, and strengthen, the NCTC's reputation across the interagency and most importantly within the intelligence community. In concert with improved internal procedures, this would work to reduce conflicts between the NCTC staffers and their home agencies, and improve an admittedly poor relationship between the director and the CIA.<sup>57</sup> He must also diligently; both formally and informally, push the NCTC agenda forward within the interagency through the production of useful, quality products. Rhetoric and GWOT clichés will not work, but tangible results will. This would make great headway in beginning to alleviate lingering doubts about his counterterrorism experience and ability to lead the U.S. counterterrorism effort.<sup>58</sup>

Internal improvements and planning efficiencies do not in themselves afford greater agility and increase adaptability, however. Our nation's ability to decisively act, react, and employ appropriate elements of national power at the right place and time are paramount to success. The NCTC, as the nation's counterterrorism lead, must be given the authority in certain circumstances to compel interagency action from the plans it has developed – meaning an increased operational role for the NCTC. As previously stated, currently the NCTC's role essentially ends when a plan is produced, excepting a yet to be developed assessment role. Short of explicit Presidential directive, there is no existing authority to compel any of the federal agencies to perform their assigned tasks contained in the plans. The NCTC does not need blanket directive authority, but when approved by the President for highly critical planning efforts, the center should be authorized to compel selected operations and activities.

Those instances requiring this authority would be generally short notice or critically important activities that require multiple coordinated and synchronized governmental actions. Granted, Presidential approval would ultimately be required, but for the multitude of tasks required to gain initiative over the enemy and adapt to his actions, near term execution authority must be granted to the NCTC Director. Directing longer term strategic actions can be achieved in the traditional method, garnering Presidential directive authority through plans that are vetted through the Counterterrorism Security Group at the National Security Council, to the President. The NCTC's directive authority must be legislated and specifically defined to ensure long-term viability and interagency compliance.

Assessing GWOT strategic successes and failures is another critical function that the NCTC must effectively develop, and is closely linked to achieving versatility and adaptability strategically. The previously discussed increased directive authority mandated in legislation



would also concurrently increase the NCTC's ability to adjust ongoing efforts and adapt them to changing circumstances as a result of this assessment. Legislation is necessary to empower the NCTC to compel the interagency to provide the resources and information necessary – in real time – to effectively monitor, and assess, ongoing counterterrorism activities. Existing plans that contain assessment metrics are dependent upon interagency information feeds, and are useless unless the mandatory data is populated into the assessment models. The NCTC's ability to comprehensively assess national progress in strategy execution is critical in ultimately achieving strategic goals.

The NCTC must also lead a push for the government to implement ways and means in implementing the GWOT strategy that transcend interagency boundaries. This is one of the most difficult challenges for the NCTC, and the interagency as a whole. Achieving true "jointness," similar to DOD mandates resulting from the Goldwater-Nichols Act, should be the government's goal. DOD's experiences and current state more than twenty years after the Act was passed foretell a lengthy process for the interagency, but offer hope for a more united interagency effort in the fight against terrorism. It will not be easy. However, legislation is required for this to occur, and it must occur for greater governmental effectiveness in executing GWOT strategy.

For the NCTC, more clearly defined interagency boundaries would forge greater communication, near-seamless information exchange, less resistance to planning and operational integration, greater trust and a sense of teamwork, and ultimately more effectiveness in executing American strategy. Again, the NCTC must realize that failure to act and challenge the status quo will likely lead to mission failure. If the NCTC does not push for change to existing bureaucratic arrangements, no agency will. Despite the patriotic servants and good intentions of the various departments, without legislation this will probably not occur. It must be mandated in law.

Aligned with the need for interagency "jointness" is a need to clarify the law concerning the NCTC Director's dual reporting responsibilities. Ideally, the NCTC director (and NCTC itself) should be an autonomous entity, at least on a co-equal basis with the DNI. This change would effectively allow the NCTC to effectively serve as the government's counterterrorism integrator and synchronizer. Changes to the existing law, however, should be implemented to clearly articulate the limits of the director's responsibilities. As identified in a 2005 study assessing the Intelligence Reform Act of 2004, "The cohesive integration of functions across the intelligence community requires relatively clear guidance, or at least the absence of contradictory or confusing authorities . . . The bifurcated reporting relationships the act outlines for the Director of

the NCTC, ill defined distinctions between types of operations, as well as the authority of NCTC to define operational success . . . are all areas in which unclear authority could lead to inefficient business practices.”<sup>59</sup> Inefficient business practices equates to ineffectiveness and an inability to make progress in synchronizing the government’s GWOT counterterrorism efforts. Clarifying reporting distinctions between the Director’s intelligence and operational functions is necessary to eliminate misperceptions, streamline decision making and coordination, and increase effectiveness.

Since the 9-11 terrorist attacks the global operating environment and U.S. strategy in fighting the war against terrorism have evolved. What has not changed is a requirement that U.S. ways and means effectively meet GWOT obligations. The NCTC, whose role, authorities, and methods are unchanged since 2004, appears to be caught between the dynamics of a changing wartime environment, and the formidable stagnancy of U.S. bureaucracy.

### Conclusion and Way Ahead

The GWOT threat and the contemporary operating environment demand a U.S. governmental organization to coordinate and effectively synchronize U.S. elements of national power and achieve unity of effort in order to implement America’s GWOT strategy and secure national security objectives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>60</sup> As previously discussed, the essential choices before the U.S. government in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks were to change existing interagency practices, or add an additional organization to perform the role of a single integrator, coordinator, and executor of counterterrorism strategies and programs. There are potentially great benefits to changing existing practices in the broader interagency community, specifically in the National Security Council and the Executive Office of the President. The decision to create a National Counterterrorism Center reflected a decision to opt for the former approach.

In doing so, there remain concerns about creating a new organization at the national-level with broad operational authorities. These concerns stem in large measure from the Tower Commission findings following the Iran-Contra scandal, the National Security Council’s operational role diminished.<sup>61</sup> However, presidents have found occasion to justify an operational role for the NSC in dealing with clearly defined threats. One example is the National Security Council’s role late in the Clinton administration in coordinating the U.S. efforts to thwart the various threats leading up to the year 2000 millennium celebration.<sup>62</sup> Modifications and improvements in the National Security Council can be made rather simply and quickly, but at best they are destined to last only four years, and may change earlier than that unless legislated

into law. America's requirements in a security environment dominated by the diverse and lethal threats posed by modern terrorism demand a longer term solution that can be institutionalized apart from the election process and the personal styles and personalities of the President and his national security team.

The U.S. requires a single federal entity focused on GWOT counterterrorism strategy with the necessary authorities to integrate intelligence, conduct comprehensive interagency planning, compel specific action when required, and coordinate and synchronize the elements of national power for successful operations. The NCTC was directed by Congress to perform this role and it is the best government solution to do so. Despite slow, but clear, progress towards effectiveness, the NCTC requires more rapid internal and external changes, and additional legislation affording operational authority, to enable full realization of its capabilities. The entire interagency community must acknowledge the NCTC's authority, work in partnership with it to improve coordination and productivity, and provide the people, expertise, and experience to facilitate its success and ensure unity of effort. Congress and the President must act to regain the momentum that was lost after the NCTC's creation, and work together to firmly ensconce its authorities in legislation, ensure it is adequately resourced over the long-term, and otherwise enable the NCTS to provide adequate strategic direction to the country's counterterrorism efforts.

With those changes, the NCTC will succeed and accomplish its mission, in concert with the entire interagency community. The global environment is dynamic and has changed substantially even since the NCTC's inception. The GWOT remains a long war for the U.S., and counterterrorism remains the key near-term component which the U.S. must address. The NCTC's continued existence, improvement, maturation, and overall capability to meet strategic requirements, remain critical for U.S. counterterrorism success.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 399.

<sup>2</sup> *Homeland Security Act of 2002*, House Resolution 5005-8, Title I, sec. 108, (2002); available from <http://www.dhs.gov/xabout/strategicplan/index.shtm>; Internet; accessed 19 February 2007.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, *Executive Order 13354 – National Counterterrorism Center* (27 August 2004); available from [http://www.nctc.gov/press\\_room/press.html](http://www.nctc.gov/press_room/press.html); Internet; accessed 01 September 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*, Public Law 108-408, sec. 119, (2004); available from [http://www.nctc.gov/press\\_room/press.html](http://www.nctc.gov/press_room/press.html); Internet; accessed 01 September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous (Michael Scheuer), *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 2004), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Ledeen, *The War Against the Terror Masters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 81.

<sup>7</sup> George W. Bush, *9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 2006), 1.

<sup>8</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 74-82.

<sup>9</sup> Ledeen, 150. The author does not state emphatically that the GWOT is equal to what we faced in the Cold War, but comments on similarities. He states that "Radical Islam . . . is to this war what communism was to the Cold War."

<sup>10</sup> David W. Barno, "Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency," *Parameters* (Summer 2006):15. Lieutenant General (Retired) Barno's article, in part, summarizes the conclusions of T.X. Hammes' book, *The Sling and the Stone*. Barno states that Fourth Generation Warfare deserves to be studied closely by the military because of its unique prism into asymmetric warfare.

<sup>11</sup> George P. Schultz, "Sustaining our Resolve," *Policy Review* 138 (Aug/Sep 2006): 4.

<sup>12</sup> The 9-11 Commission's formal name is The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. It was created as a politically-bipartisan panel by the Congress and President in Public Law 107-306 on 27 November 2002. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, xv.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>14</sup> John Lehman, "Five Years Later: Are We Any Safer?," *United States Naval Institute, Proceedings* 132 (Sep 2006):18. Lehman adds, "Are we winning the war? The first question to ask is what war? The administration of President George W. Bush continues to befuddle a national understanding of the war we are in by continuing to call it 'the war on terror.' This political correctness presumably seeks to avoid hurting the feelings of the Saudis and other Muslims, but it comes at a high cost." Lehman goes on to cite the high cost as confusion within the American people, Congress, and the administration itself.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. Sageman adds: "The global Salafi jihad is a new development in the annals of terrorism. It combines fanaticism . . . with terrorism against a 'far enemy,' a global target to bring about a utopia."

<sup>17</sup> Alan G. Stolberg, "The International System in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, edited by J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, June 2006), 3-10.

<sup>18</sup> Philip C. Cerny, "Terrorism and the New Security Dilemma," *Naval War College Review* 58 (Winter 2005):11.

<sup>19</sup> George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: September 2002), unnumbered page, first page of cover memorandum.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: March 2006), unnumbered page, first page of cover memorandum .

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 43-46.

<sup>23</sup> For several opinions consistent with this, see Ledeen and the *9-11 Commission Report*.

<sup>24</sup> Ledeen, xxi. He adds: "The new part of the war concerns the structure of the terrorist organizations: They are organized in cells, not regular armies, and they hide themselves within civil society and attack innocent civilians pursuing normal activities, rather than setting themselves apart by wearing uniforms and attacking our armed forces on battlefields."

<sup>25</sup> Richard A. Clarke et al., *Defeating the Jihadists: A Blueprint for Action* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup> Sageman, 137. Sageman's overarching thesis was that America's methods in the GWOT should emphasize the importance of social bonds in terrorist networks and not overly emphasize Salafist ideology.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Statement for the Record by John Scott Redd, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, 13 June 2006, available from <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2006/reddtestimony060613.pdf>; Internet; accessed on 13 December 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of some of these bureaucratic traps are posed by Richard K. Betts in "How to Think About Terrorism," *The Wilson Quarterly* 30 (Winter 2006): 45-46. Betts states that: "Complex bureaucracies misroute information; the amount of intelligence proves to be excessive rather than insufficient, and salient indicators are buried in a clutter of information; false alarms foster a 'cry wolf' syndrome . . . uncertainty leads decision makers to search for more information, which delays response . . . and so on." He adds, "Organizational changes to fix the problems usually create new vulnerabilities in the process of fixing the old ones."

<sup>30</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 403.

<sup>31</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Section 101, U.S.C. 402, mandates that, “The function of the Council shall be to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.” Available from [http://www.intelligence.gov/0-natsecact\\_1947.shtml#s101](http://www.intelligence.gov/0-natsecact_1947.shtml#s101); Internet; accessed on 13 December 2006.

<sup>33</sup> David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York, Public Affairs: 2005), 49.

<sup>34</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 399-400.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Rood, “Threat Connector,” *Government Executive* 38 (01 April 2006): 42.

<sup>36</sup> George W. Bush, *Executive Order 13354 – National Counterterrorism Center*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*.

<sup>39</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 406.

<sup>40</sup> National Counterterrorism Center Slides, dated 01 March 2006, slide one, available from <https://www.hsdl.org/homesec/docs/dtic/nps23-071206-01.pdf>; Internet; accessed on 17 October 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004*.

<sup>43</sup> National Counterterrorism Center Slides, slide 3.

<sup>44</sup> Author’s first hand experience from his work with NCTC from 2005-2006 while assigned to United States Special Operations Command.

<sup>45</sup> National Counterterrorism Center Slides, slide 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., slide 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., slide 6.

<sup>48</sup> In John Redd’s Statement for Record to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee referenced above, he states that the second phase of planning involves the “interagency coordination of operational activities . . . the coordination, integration, and synchronization of departmental operations. We are just beginning to work out how this will function in practice.”

<sup>49</sup> George W. Bush, *The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: February 2003), 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 15-28.

<sup>52</sup> George W. Bush, *The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: September 2006), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1. A slightly different twist to the strategy was delivered by President Bush In a major address on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, in which he outlined America's strategy for combating terrorism as containing five basic elements: prevent terrorist attacks before they occur; deny weapons of mass destruction to outlaw regimes and terrorists who would use them; deny terrorists the support of outlaw regimes; deny terrorist networks control of any nation, or territory within a nation; and, deny terrorists new recruits by defeating their hateful ideology and spreading the hope of freedom. Available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/print/20060905-4.html>; Internet; accessed on 13 December 2006.

<sup>54</sup> George W. Bush, *9/11 Five Years Later: Successes and Challenges*. Under the "Challenges Ahead" chapter, the report states: "We must employ all elements of U.S. national power, including public diplomacy, development, and democracy-building programs, to address the conditions which terrorists exploit and to counter extremist propaganda and recruiting." Again, there is no mention of specific interagency coordination, integration, synchronization, or planning challenges within the report.

<sup>55</sup> Melvin A. Goodman, "America Is Safer Since 9/11," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 September 2006, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas H. Kean, et al, "Final Report on 9/11 Commission Recommendations," 9/11 Public Discourse Project, 05 December 2005, available from <http://www.9-11pdp.org>; Internet; accessed on 01 September 2006.

<sup>57</sup> Rood, 48.

<sup>58</sup> Shane Harris, "The New Spy Masters," *Government Executive* 37 (15 October 2005): 44.

<sup>59</sup> Todd M. Masse, "The National Counterterrorism Center: Implementation Challenges and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 24 March 2005, available from <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crg/intel/rl32816.pdf>; Internet; accessed 01 September 2006.

<sup>60</sup> An interesting and related foreign perspective can be found in V.I. Molensky, et al. "Organizing the State's Antiterrorist Activities," *Military Thought* 14 (2005): 36-39. Though not wholly applicable, the viewpoints of the Russian authors concerning analysis of the 2004 terrorist acts in Moscow, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia coincide correctly, I believe, with the proper U.S. approach to the GWOT. The authors argue that their home country's failings in antiterrorism efforts were due to the lack of a systems approach to the threat, and they advocated a national, comprehensive system of governmental measures to oppose international terrorism. "Understanding the structure of international terrorism," they wrote, "precisely thus makes it possible to conclude that combating it is possible only within the framework of a single state system." They added that the system should encompass "not only all the spheres of internal political, socioeconomic and military activities, but also political cooperation with interested public and government organizations in other countries."

<sup>61</sup> Rothkopf, 255. Succinctly highlighting the importance of personality in a bureaucracy as applied to the National Security Council, Rothkopf added on page 302: “Because it isn’t the process or the system as much as it is the people who form that process or system and who make it work – or who are responsible for its failings.”

<sup>62</sup> See Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 205-220. Clarke was director of the National Security Council’s Counterterrorism Security Group and summarized his efforts during the “Millennium Alert” in these pages. Clarke’s efforts produced a “Pol-Mil” plan for coordinating and synchronizing the government’s actions to identify threats and prevent attacks on the U.S. and U.S. interests. Although planning and execution occurred at a much smaller scale than that which is required for the GWOT, it remains an example of how effectiveness could be achieved through an effective, and empowered, NSC.